MUTUALLY ASSURED DESTRUCTION IS M.A.D.
Matthew 26:45-52
February 18, 1979

Gerald J. Gregg
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

As the Gospel according to Matthew tells the story, one of the earliest teachings of Jesus was about peace. He spoke encouragingly to the crowd gathered at the foot of a mountain and made a promise: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." Concluding His account the same Matthew reports that the very last teaching of Jesus' earthly ministry also concerned peace. You heard it as the last verse of today's scripture lesson: Jesus said, "All who take the sword will perish by the sword." It was a sharp reprimand, a warning to His disciples gathered then in the Garden of Gethsemane and to followers in churches in all generations since. It has haunted me for some time now. Are we trying today to live by the sword?

Throughout my entire career in the ministry I have made personal commitments - sometimes costly commitments - to relate the gospel of Christ to the problems of society. I have never gone looking for social concerns; there have always been enough and more than enough right at hand, crying out for attention. I have always been kept so busy with the problems right in the community where I lived, that I felt no twinge of conscience about leaving the worldwide problems to the experts, the diplomats and statesmen. So, while I prayed for peace and disarmament, I didn't get involved. There was more than enough to do at home. In fact, to be very frank, many of the characters most vocal about disarmament struck me as kooks, on-the-fringe types with whom I identified very little.

Since last October I have become increasingly uncomfortable with that situation. Heaven knows, there is a superabundance of problems calling for our Christian ministry right here in Columbus and in this immediate neighborhood. And it is vital that we care for them. But now I have to raise the question whether we Christians must not take a bigger share in the biggest question concerning our world's future, the question of peace and disarmament. I am finding more and more that the Gethsemane words of Jesus are pointing at me and at my nation and at my world: "All who take the sword will perish by the sword."

My thinking has been changed by a lot of reading done since last October. It began when I was given a book entitled The Global Connection, a book written by Dennis Shoemaker, when he was one of the national staff leaders of our denomination. You will be interested to know that the Reverend Shoemaker and his wife Mary now live in Columbus and have regularly been attending our worship services in preparation for joining this congregation two weeks from today.

Last Friday I phoned for permission to mention him in this sermon. Until then, he didn't know what impact his book made on me. In fact, I haven't talked about this with anyone very much. I had a lot of homework to do, a lot to catch up on, a lot of personal ignorance to inform, a lot of thinking and praying to do before I could trust myself to speak. I wanted to go at the issue as factually as possible and not get drawn into someone else's emotional fervor.

I am sure some of you are far ahead of me in this concern. Whether you are or not, perhaps you can relate to my lifelong attitude that it was plenty to take care of problems just in the community. So I'd like to tell you just a little of what has gripped my conscience these last four months. The details are very complex and intertwined, but I'll try to capsulize a few points. I don't have any anecdotes to lighten this account. I simply ask you to work hard with me for the next fifteen minutes or so.

First, a word of caution. I'm going to be speaking primarily about our own nation's part in the most horrendous situation our world has ever faced. That is not to say other nations do not share responsibility. They certainly do, most notably Russia. But our own nation's role must concern us first for three reasons. Number one, as citizens we are primarily responsible for our own national policies. Second, there is little we can do about policies of other nations except as they react to our national strategy.

The third reason is very hard to discuss right now, when America's ambassadors and international representatives are being murdered and American citizens are being harshly treated by peoples we have befriended. America has a great deal of pain right now and any criticism is hard to take. So the third reason is a bitter pill to swallow: we Americans must focus first on America when we talk about peace and disarmament because the documentation is overwhelming that at nearly every stage of nuclear escalation our country has taken the first step, made the first threat.

Now, a word about money. I've had a hard time appreciating the enormous sums involved, dealing in hundreds of billions. How much is a billion dollars, after all? Take just one portion, the increase in military spending proposed for the new national budget. The recommended increase is quoted as being a "real three percent increase", which means three percent on top of the inflationary increase. On the surface that doesn't sound so bad. Very few political figures are debating the Pentagon on the matter. Hardly anyone is pointing out that already more than half the tax dollars which Congress can allocate are going to the military. What does another three percent matter?

Well, I had to put that question into terms I could understand. The largest financial transaction I have ever been involved in personally was buying a house when we moved to Columbus. So I wondered, how many houses like the Greggs' could be purchased with the proposed military increase - just the increase? I didn't believe the calculator readout at first, so I worked it out again. Is it possible the military increase for just this one year would buy outright a home like the Greggs' for every family in Columbus? More than that; it would buy each family two such houses.

That helped me understand the billions involved, but of course two more homes for every Columbus family is not the world's greatest need. What about hunger, worldwide hunger? I believe in the self-help programs to combat hunger, helping people so they can raise their own food and become self-supporting. But for this comparison I wanted a simpler example; how much food could be bought to feed the world's starving millions? I took the figures of Church World Service, by far the largest non-governmental agency dealing in world relief - the agency which distributes our One Great Hour of Sharing Offering, by the way. Of course, we couldn't expect the government to be anywhere near as efficient as a church agency, so let's figure thirty-three percent. At one-third efficiency, what effect would the military budget increase have if applied to world hunger instead? The answer; it would completely eliminate hunger. The moral issue is extremely clear: more bombs or eradicate world starvation? That issue shouldn't surprise us. More than seven hundred years before Christ two great Old Testament prophets, Isaiah and Micah, used precisely the same words to tell us the moral solution: "They shall beat their swords into plows, and their spears into pruning hooks."

Big reductions in military spending? What would happen to our national economy? Wouldn't unemployment zoom? Several authors reminded me about the Old

South's reaction to the movement to abolish slavery more than a hundred years ago. Moral questions aside, slavery was absolutely necessary to the economy, so said popular opinion. But the economic argument for slavery was not true then, as history proved, and many analysts say it is not true for the gross military expenditures today.

They point to Japan, for instance. Since their surrender in 1945 that nation has been prohibited from developing a military force - no money for bombs and armaments. As a result their economic growth has completely outstripped America's and now, in many industrial areas, we simply cannot compete with Japan.

I have read statistics showing that money spent for military hardware provides far fewer jobs than equivalent amounts spent in other areas such as health care and education. Military spending by its very nature does not produce consumer goods or services and that means inflation spirals up. An increasing number of economists these days are saying that military spending is far and away the major cause of our nation's inflation.

World hunger and our own pocketbooks - those are two good reasons to be concerned about increased military spending. If that isn't enough, there is a third reason: sheer survival. In 1967 Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara formulated a national policy called Mutually Assured Destruction. The initials spell out the word "mad", and in fact that was the shorthand word used in national policy circles. M.A.D. meant simply that we would make sure the Russians never fired their nuclear missiles at us because, while their bombs were on the way to destroy us, we would quickly launch missiles enough to wipe out all the Russian cities. Secretary McNamara was asked what that would require by way of our own missile buildup. He replied we must be capable of completely destroying Russia's major cities, 219 of them. No one considered him a dove. But in the next ten years America increased its nuclear capability so that by 1977 we could destroy Russia's 219 cities 36 times over. Of course they soon became able to do just about the same to us. We have gone on building and stockpiling three more warheads each day since. Doesn't there come a time to say enough is enough?

America must be strong in order to preserve peace. That is the argument long used to justify our nuclear stockpiling. But now I have to wonder: what is America's strength? Is it just the strength of military power? I've always been a proud American because of the moral power and courage of this nation. I think that is our real strength. But what does it say about our moral leadership when the Defense Department announces in 1970 that we have nuclear stores sufficient to kill everyone in the world thirteen times over and then continues to stockpile higher and higher? Thirteen times world overkill isn't enough military power? Where is the appropriate balance between military power and moral power?

And what about the morality when a few years ago American military minds decided being able to cremate Russia many times over wasn't enough? We had to have a "first strike capability", be able to destroy all Russia's missiles before they could fire them. Our nation was informing the world that we would be the first to push the doomsday button. I have great difficulty seeing the morality in that. It sounds like a schoolboy bully daring anyone to step over the line. Someone might be just juvenile enough to take the dare. Is it possible that we are bypassing moral leadership in our unquestioning reliance on military might? In his monumental book A Study of History, Arnold J. Toynbee argued that that is exactly what caused the downfall of every previous civilization in history.

All the experts I've read agree there is no real defense against nuclear devastation, no military way to prevent the destruction of America and Americans. The only assurance all our weapons provide is that we probably could retaliate and destroy the destroyer with our last gasp. In reality every step of nuclear escalation has resulted in less security and greater danger for everyone. The first SALT agreement barely slowed the process. SALT II is vital; it's the best we have going, but no one expects very great things from it. Meanwhile, the possibility of nuclear holocaust grows likelier and likelier. Some good thinkers are now saying it is inevitable and the reasons they advance are very hard to dispute.

I could go on and on. Chapter and verse could be cited endlessly. I could quote from my reading to describe sickening scenarios of doomsday. It does not get any better. All my reading seems to say that we either work to abolish nuclear weapons, in fact abolish war, or we will instead abolish civilization.

This whole subject is very upsetting. But I'm really a pretty nice guy, so why am I telling you these awful things? First of all, because I trust you. I trust you to see that I am deeply concerned and I trust you to take the concern seriously, even to share it. I'm telling you because I believe this is part of what it means to be a minister, to try to point out where there are serious failings to follow Christ's teachings. I'm telling you because in all my reading these past four months today's scripture lesson has reverberated over and over in my mind: "All who take the sword will perish by the sword."

And I'm telling you because I want your help. I want you to read about the disarmament crisis and then help me judge whether I'm on the right track or not. I've made a list of the major books which have influenced me. Maybe you'd be willing to read some of them. They are easy to get hold of. Copies of the list are in the literature racks and in the church library. When you've studied the situation, let me know. Should I not be so concerned? Or if you think the concern is valid, should we get together to see what we can do?

In none of what I've said do I mean to be disparaging of our nation's leaders. By and large those we elect to national office serve us Americans with dedication and integrity. But it seems the armament problem has gotten way beyond them. They need help to change the present insane direction. That help just may be us and others like us.

When it comes right down to it, we have always known political power is not enough to bring peace and wholeness to our world. Economic power won't do it. And military power is certainly not the answer. We know what the church has taught us all our lives, that the way of Christ offers the only real hope to our troubled world. I believe that way has never been more desperately needed. For the sake of every man, woman and child, the world must heed Christ's warning to all who live by the sword. It seems to me that if we Christian churchpeople fail to represent Christ against the bomb, no one will.

Our heavenly Father, You have given us life and then in the Christ you gave us the love to support us, even in the midst of the world's terrors. In You we have strength and courage. Help us now to live bravely as peacemakers, showing the way of Jesus as the only way of life for this world encircled by instruments of death. In His name we pray.

Amen.